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Magnitude of asbestos scare grows

By GREG GORDON
BEE WASHINGTON BUREAU
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WASHINGTON -- An insulation product made from asbestos-tainted Montana ore was poured into attics and walls of perhaps more than 10 million homes -- far more than the 940,000 homes originally estimated, federal officials say.

Because Zonolite attic insulation was produced at plants in Sacramento (1956-1964) and Newark (1964-1994), sizable numbers of affected homes are believed to be located in Northern and Central California.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency was preparing to issue a nationwide alert about the problem last year, but reconsidered after protests from the company that sold Zonolite and the White House's Office of Management and Budget.

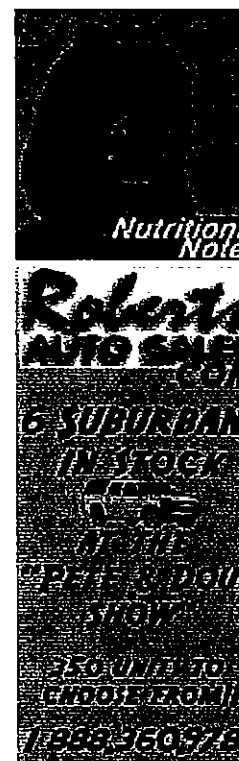
Zonolite, which was made from vermiculite ore, has an asbestos content of less than 1 percent. But EPA officials say that merely jostling the fluffy, easy-to-crumble granules can release microscopic asbestos fibers into the air at dangerous concentrations.

If inhaled at these levels, Zonolite's particularly toxic strain of tremolite asbestos can cause disabling or lethal lung diseases that don't show up for 10 to 40 years, they said.

Regional EPA officials, giving credence to a Dec. 29 St. Louis Post-Dispatch report, said Administrator Christine Todd Whitman grew so concerned about the Zonolite problem last winter that she directed aides to come up with strategies for alerting homeowners nationwide.

The EPA officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Whitman also was on the verge of declaring an unprecedented "Public Health Emergency" authorizing removal of Zonolite from homes in the asbestos-devastated town of Libby, Mont. Libby is situated near the mountain where miners unknowingly extracted the tainted vermiculite from the early 1920s until 1990.

Agency planning had gone so far that press releases were drafted announcing both actions, these officials said, when Whitman abruptly dropped them both. They said that internal e-mails and other evidence show the White House's Office of Management and Budget interceded in April, pressuring EPA to abandon the initiatives.



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Now-bankrupt W.R. Grace & Co., which operated the mine from 1963 to 1989 and marketed Zonolite nationally, sent Whitman a letter last April opposing both the warning and the emergency declaration.

In a letter sent to Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., on Thursday, Whitman said EPA, not OMB, made both decisions, and that OMB was only one of many agencies that had input. She said she put off a decision on a nationwide health warning about Zonolite until she learns more about its risks from an ongoing agency study. Murray proposed legislation last year that would require EPA to launch a national campaign to educate the public about Zonolite.

Whitman also wrote that she chose not to declare an emergency for Libby, where asbestos has killed or sickened hundreds of residents, because of a concern that "possible legal challenges to this untested approach" could delay cleanup efforts.

Estimates hard to come by

Because sales records are scattered or have been destroyed, experts say it is impossible to determine precisely how many U.S. homes contain Zonolite. EPA officials now say that a 1985 agency assessment estimating it was present in about 940,000 homes was not reliable.

Darrell Scott, a Spokane, Wash., lawyer handling class-action lawsuits in which thousands of homeowners are seeking damages from Grace, estimated that Zonolite sold after 1950 is in 3 million to 10 million homes. A memo from the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry estimated that the insulation is in 12 million to 35 million homes, offices and schools.

In a nine-page, April 10 letter to the EPA chief, William Corcoran, Grace's vice president of public and regulatory affairs, said that the Montana ore contained only small amounts of asbestos, nearly all of which was removed during the manufacture of Zonolite.

"There is no credible reason to believe" that Zonolite "has ever caused an asbestos-related disease in anyone who has used it in his/her home," he wrote in the April 10 letter.

Public records and asbestos experts say otherwise.

In 1993, a Missouri appeals court upheld a \$2.5 million jury award to Edward Harashe, a 67-year-old retired St. Louis plumber who died that year of mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the lungs caused by asbestos. The court traced Harashe's death to his decisions to insulate his home in the 1950s with 20 bags of Zonolite and to add more during a 1975 renovation.

Paul Peronard, formerly the EPA's on-scene coordinator of an \$85 million federal asbestos cleanup in and around Libby, said the agency's air sampling in the attics of Libby homeowners who used Zonolite insulation "have shown very clearly that if you disturb the material, you get very, very high levels of asbestos.

"Quite a few people have reported contracting asbestos-related diseases just from handling the insulation," Peronard said.

The EPA has removed the insulation from the attics of about 30 Libby-area homes at a cost of about \$10,000 each.

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When Grace last year played down the risks of Zonolite in the bankruptcy court, EPA lawyers filed briefs challenging the firm's "incorrect and misleading" statements.

High exposure readings

EPA officials said their sampling in homes where the Zonolite lay undisturbed found asbestos levels 10 to 100 times higher than those Grace reported and, when they stirred up vermiculite dust, they measured "exposure levels at 10,000 to 100,000 times higher" than Grace's readings.

Keven McDermott, who investigated vermiculite exposures for EPA's Seattle regional office, said in a phone interview that she gets calls each week from

homeowners who just discovered Zonolite in their attics.

"If there's a common theme," she said, "it's that, 'I wish I'd known sooner. I'm afraid that I've needlessly exposed my family, and particularly my children, to asbestos.'"

Among those at greatest risk for exposure to Zonolite are workers who enter attics to install television cables, phone lines and plumbing vents or to perform renovations.

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